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ABSTRACT

The relationship between self-directed learning and self-access is discussed as a system of organizing resources. The first part of the paper outlines the skills needed for self-directed learning in a self-access center. The skills include defining objectives, identifying resources, selecting resources, using resources, evaluating action, and redefining objectives. The second part describes how self-access resources at The University of Hong Kong Language Centre have been reorganized to help develop these skills. The reorganization includes the use of a personal computer database to help students plan programs of study. One of the findings of the project has been that little is really known about the motive and decision-making processes of learners in self-access situations. Contains 8 references. (LB)

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Philip Benson

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Self-Access For Self-Directed Learning

Philip Benson

This paper discusses the relationship between self-directed learning and self-access as a system of organising learning resources. The first part of the paper outlines the skills needed for self-directed learning in a self-access centre. The second part describes how self-access English resources at Hong Kong University Language Centre have been reorganised to help develop these skills. This includes the use of a PC database to help students plan programmes of study.

Introduction

The literature on self-instruction in language learning includes several descriptions of self access centres (SAC) and how they work (Barnett & Jordan 1991; Dickinson 1987; Miller 1992; Mitchener 1991; Riley & Zoppis, 1985; Sheerin 1990). But these tend to be descriptive or practical with little discussion of the influence of organisational systems on the learning process. This paper argues that the influence can be positive, and that a system of self-access organisation can even become a tool for learners to develop self-directed learning skills. In the first part of the paper I will discuss self-directed learning in a SAC, the skills that it calls for and the ways in which the SAC can help. In the second part I will show how a project to reorganise self-access English resources in the Language Centre at Hong Kong University (HKU)[1] has been oriented towards the development of self-directed learning skills. The aim of the project is to make self-access resources more accessible and more informative, and in the final section I will outline the role of a computer database in achieving this.

Self-access and self-directed learning

Self-access and self-directed learning are not the same thing (Dickinson 1987, p.10; Sheerin 1991, p.144). Self-access refers to the design and organisation of resources, whereas self-direction is a learning situation which calls for certain skills on the part of the learner if it is to be productive. The two are closely connected, however, and self-access might be defined as the design and organisation of resources for self-directed learning, if not for the fact that many SAC users are in reality other-directed to one degree or another. Nevertheless, the assumption that SAC users are self-directed is a useful starting point for considering self-access systems, since this is likely to be the case at least some of the time.

At HKU the largest group of SAC users are students on 60-hour EAP courses of which 20 hours are timetabled for 'self-access'. These students can turn to their class teachers and to learner training materials in making a gradual transition from other-direction to self-direction. But because many teachers see self-direction or learner autonomy as an educational goal in its own right, there is an expectation that the SAC should be able to support entirely self-directed learners. This is also a practical need since EAP courses are currently offered only to first-year undergraduates, and self-access represents an opportunity to continue study in subsequent years.

The nature of self-direction dictates a need for learner-support from within the self-access system itself. In this paper, self-directed learning is understood in terms of learners taking responsibility for major decisions such as why, what, where, when and how they are going to study. At HKU students initially tend to be unaccustomed to making these kinds of decisions and they are faced with a need to acquire new learning skills for self-access. But there seems to be a quality about self-direction which makes attempts to teach it self-contradictory. Learning techniques can be taught, but it seems to be impossible to teach learners how to set and evaluate their own objectives without somehow compromising the integrity of self-direction. There is therefore a strong logic to the notion that the best way for the learner to acquire the skills needed for self-direction is to practise self-directed learning and to reflect on it (Holec 1985, p.180).

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If it is accepted, then, that the function of a self-access system is largely to support and promote self-directed learning (Sheerin 1991, p.144), the important issues are the identification of the skills needed for self-directed learning and the system which will best support their acquisition through a process of discovery.

Self-directed learning skills

The identification of self-directed learning skills and the ways in which the SAC can support their development can be approached by analyzing the steps which a learner must take in following a programme of learning focused on the SAC. These are illustrated in figure 1:

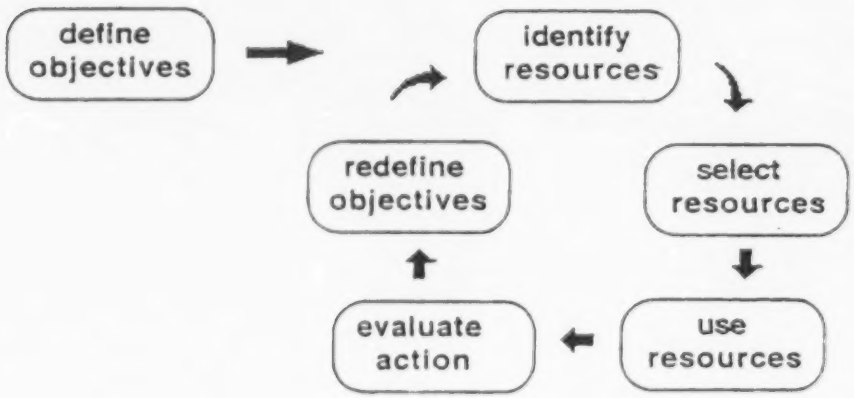

Figure 1 - Stages in a programme of self-directed learning

Before discussing these steps in detail, two general points can be made. Firstly, the process of self-directed learning is cyclical and progressive, and the development of a programme of learning depends largely upon evaluation and redefinition of objectives. Secondly, failure at any stage of the process may influence the learner's feeling of satisfaction and willingness to persist with self-directed learning. But failures at earlier stages can be turned to the learner's advantage if there is an effective evaluation of the learning activity and a redefinition of objectives. It is important, therefore, for the SAC to support the learner throughout the cycle, and especially at the stages of evaluation and redefinition of objectives.

Defining objectives: When students first approach the SAC it is difficult to predict what objectives they will have in mind, how they will express them or indeed whether they will have any clearly focused objectives at all. Objectives need not necessarily be expressed in terms of a learning goal, but it is clearly important that the users select materials with some course of action in mind.

The SAC cannot define objectives for the learner, but it can help by channelling thought into categories which match the resources available. Browsing is an important aid in defining objectives, but the physical grouping of materials can only represent one method of classification. If various methods of classification are available (skills which can be improved, language points covered, content, medium and so on) learners may more easily define objectives which match their own perceptions of language learning with the resources available.

Identifying resources: Once objectives have been defined, the SAC can help by informing the learner of the options available. This could be more than a simple list of materials, and could include options outside the SAC. The SAC should also inform the learner when no options are available, and perhaps offer help on the reformulation or adjustment of objectives.

Selecting resources: When more than one option corresponds to an objective the learner must choose from among them. The SAC should therefore be able to inform the learner of the differences between resources and the implications of selecting them.

Using resources: There are a number of aspects to this: locating selected items and any extra materials needed to use them, allocating time for the activity, interpreting the nature of the task, following instructions, obtaining feedback on activities, and so on. On these points the SAC should provide explicit instructions at the point at which the learner needs them.

Evaluating action: When the learner has finished with an activity, there is almost certain to be some kind of evaluation of it. The learner's feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with an activity constitute an initial form of evaluation, and the SAC may help to make these feelings more specific by ensuring that information is available which allows a comparison of the results of the activity with the stated aim of the materials and the learner's original objective. If there is a feeling of dissatisfaction, the learner should be able to decide whether it is a new type of activity or a new objective which is needed.

The evaluation stage seems to be the most difficult for a self-access system to address directly. The system may explicitly prompt the learner at the end of an activity, but this cannot ensure that evaluation will take place. It is at this point, therefore, that external help may be needed most to encourage learners to develop their own evaluation of activities they have carried out.

Redefining objectives: At this point, the learner needs to decide if a new or modified objective is needed, or if the same objective can be productively repeated. The self-access system must, therefore, be flexible enough to allow comparison of materials according to criteria which are relevant to the learner, so that the next selection will represent a step forward.

To summarize these steps, the development of self-directed learning skills appears to be a process of trial and error in which the possibilities for error are numerous. If self-directed learning does not run smoothly, learners may feel that it is a poor option and abandon it altogether. For this reason, it is also important that the SAC should relieve learners of as many mechanical decisions as possible by providing explicit directions and instructions wherever they may be needed. Learners are unlikely to benefit from a search for obscurely located materials, or from a hunt for a hidden answer key.

More positively, self-directed learning appears to hinge on decisions about objectives and methods of realising them. While the SAC cannot make decisions for learners or force them to make decisions for themselves, it can facilitate decision-making by being as explicit and informative as possible in terms which approach learners' perceptions of language learning. This involves the use of various criteria of classification and the provision of information on the similarities and differences between materials. Since decisions are made at several stages, information needs to be available in more than one form. It must also be provided in terms which the learner can understand, and in forms which are easily accessible. The next section describes how the Language Centre at HKU has tried to build these features into a SAC.

The self-access system at HKU

The reorganisation of self-access resources at HKU was prompted by the introduction of self-access into EAP courses and a feeling that the existing system had grown somewhat inaccessible. For EAP students self-access is a course requirement, and while the opportunity to try a new way of learning seems to be appreciated, there is a clear need for support both from course tutors and from the SAC itself. An opportunity therefore arose to rethink the system along lines which would support the development of self-directed learning skills.

An opportunity also arose to consider the role of a database in the system as a whole and its value as an aid to self-directed learning. The conclusions of the reorganisation are discussed below under the headings of organisation, classification and indexing, and the computer database.

Organisation: At present, the SAC contains five kinds of materials: video-cassettes, audio-cassettes, computer software, books and worksheets. These are displayed on separate shelves. Software items (video-cassettes, audio-cassettes and computer software) are located close to the areas where they are used, and the print materials (books and worksheets) are near the entrance. Students are free to take items from the shelves and use them within the SAC. In many cases there is a relationship between print material and items of software although they are shelved separately (for example, a worksheet designed to be used with a video-cassette). These relationships are indicated by cross-references and users may have to gather the materials they need from more than one location. These aspects of organization have been retained. Open access shelving allows users to browse, which is a valuable learning activity in its own right (Sheerin 1991, p.148), and the major classification by physical form corresponds to classification by medium (which appears to be an important criterion for users).

Two changes have been made to the organisation of materials: the introduction of sub-classification and the development of the worksheet section as an access route to the resources. Formerly materials within a medium were assigned code numbers in the order that they were added to the SAC. Although students were readily able to find materials by using a card index, the code numbers had no particular significance and the order in which items were shelved was meaningless. Two major sub-classifications have been introduced. Firstly, in the video, audio and print sections materials are divided into authentic materials (not originally produced for language learning) and courseware (in-house and commercially produced materials). Secondly, each category is sub-classified; authentic materials by genre and topic, and courseware by language learning categories. These categories are intuitive and are intended to be meaningful to users; they are based on materials available and do not follow any a priori schema (cf. Riley and Zoppis 1985, p.290). Code numbers now include a two- letter code which determines the order in which they are shelved. These two-letter codes are allocated in such a way that related materials are shelved close to each other. Initially codes were designed to be mnemonic (e.g. LC = Listening Comprehension), but this is no longer necessarily the case because priority has been given to the grouping of items on the shelf display.

The second change in the system of organisation was to develop the worksheet section of the SAC as the initial access route to self-directed learning. An assumption is made here that guided worksheet-type activities are an easier introduction to self-directed learning than direct access to authentic materials, and learners are encouraged to access software-based items through worksheets in the first instance. The design and organisation of the worksheet section aims to give as much assistance to the learner as possible. Both in-house and commercially-produced materials tend not to be explicit about their objectives and functions (often for good reasons) and one change has been to provide information on each worksheet in the form of a coversheet. This coversheet gives information on the functions of the worksheet (described more fully under *indexing* below), a descriptive outline of its objectives and contents, and instructions aimed to give the user an overview of the activity. The general aim of the coversheet is to express the content of the worksheet as action. Because information is on a separate sheet attached to the worksheet, it is not obtrusive, but it is still available at several stages: browsing and selection, use and evaluation.

Indexing: Indexing is a different procedure from coding in that it has no effect on the physical organisation of materials. Also, while coding involves the allocation of items to categories, indexing is more a question of making explicit information which is implicit in the materials. Riley and Zoppis (1985, p.292 ff.) and Dickinson (1987, p.114) describe indexing systems for video and audio materials based on content and linguistic information. At HKU we have been more concerned in the first instance with indexing of worksheets and the system developed differs from others in focusing on functional categories. These are based on what can be done with the materials and reasons for selecting them. The aim is to provide information which will help the learner to make decisions based on the learning options suggested by materials rather than their content alone.

The definition of headings and the categories listed under them has been one of the most difficult aspects of indexing, and the headings finally chosen are as follows:

1. Main language **skill** which the activity is designed to improve or practice.
2. Types of **activities** or exercises included in the activity.
3. Any **language points** stressed in the activity.
4. Any non-linguistic **topic** covered in the activity.
5. The **medium** of the activity (video, audio, computer, pair work, etc.).
6. An estimate of the **time** needed for the activity.

An indication of the level of the worksheet may also be added. Of the six headings listed four correspond to the functions of the worksheet and two (language point and topic) to the content. All of the headings correspond to criteria which learners might employ in selecting worksheets, and the indexing information is recorded on worksheet cover sheets so that it can be used in conjunction with the outline and instructions as a basis for selection and evaluation of worksheets. Because information is clearly organised under headings, the learner can focus on the similarities and differences between activities, which is an essential part of deciding where to go next.

The computer database: A computer database appears to be a logical solution to the problem of dealing with large quantities of indexed information. Databases for SAC cataloguing are discussed by Dickinson (1987, p.115) and Sheerin (1991, p.148) whose comments are not entirely positive. Barnett and Jordan (1991) are more positive in showing how a database is used to help students identify 'paths of study' in an SAC. The use of a database in the SAC at HKU had been planned for some time, but it proved impossible to implement until the resources themselves had been reorganised, suggesting that as much attention needs to be given to the underlying information system as to the technicalities of the database. Also, how the database will be used calls for careful consideration. The use of databases in SACs is a logical development of their use in libraries, but the library catalogue model may not be the best for self-access. In fact, at HKU the database is not intended as a replacement for the card index. It is designed more as a learner training tool used to explore resources and plan activities.

The database designed for the SAC at HKU makes use of a PC relational database management package. All information relating to self-access resources is stored in the database, which can be used to print out lists, index cards and labels. At present, however, SAC users only access the part of the database which covers worksheets (this will be extended to cover authentic materials using different criteria at a later date). The database is a relatively simple one consisting of 8 columns: the code number and title of the worksheet and the six headings described under 'indexing'. Although there are several methods of storing this kind of indexed information, the computer database is unique in its capacity to sort and group items under various headings. The physical layout of the resources, for example, can only represent one type of grouping, whereas the computer can display eight different types of grouping (corresponding to the eight column headings) and more if combinations of columns are included. For this reason the computer allows the learners to display materials according to various methods of classification, and compare and differentiate them.

Users are not expected to use the database to search for the location of known items (the card index would probably be the quicker alternative in any case). It is mainly designed to search for groups of items according to index categories. Examples of possible searches under each heading are (the relevant keyword is underlined):

1. **Skill**: activities designed to improve pronunciation.
2. **Activity**: activities using the CALL program Gapmaster.
3. **Language point**: activities focused on sentence connectors.
4. **Topic**: activities focused on pop music.
5. **Medium**: activities using video.
6. **Time**: activities which are likely to take less than 30 minutes.

Users can, of course, combine searches on different columns. This narrows down the number of items displayed, but also increases the possibility of a negative response. Combined searches are an effective method of choosing a way forward in a programme of self-directed learning. The learner may choose to continue on the same track (all columns the same), or move in a different direction (one or more columns different).

There are inevitably certain limitations to the database. Firstly, the use of a database constrains the terms which can be used in indexing. Care has to be taken to express the same idea in consistent terms (and to avoid typing errors). A significant limitation is the difficulty of matching the words in the database to the user's choice of words. For example, a user who enters popular music for **topic** will be disappointed if the database entry reads pop music. This is a problem inherent in PC database packages and although there may be some positive spin-off in training learners to think clearly in terms of categories, frustration seems a more likely result. Unfortunately most PC database packages do not readily allow direct selection from a menu, but the user can choose a category from a list of those available in a particular column and then type it in.

There is also the possibility of consulting a 'glossary' in which keywords in the database are defined. The user can look up a keyword in the glossary, or search the glosses for a similar word. For example, the term 'social English' (used frequently by HKU students, but not used as a category in the database) could be found in the glosses for the keywords speaking, conversation and colloquial; a user who wants to 'improve social English' could then proceed to search for these items in the database. There is also a likelihood that users will have difficulty in distinguishing between the column headings, so a facility is also provided which allows users to search for a keyword in all columns.

These are, of course, imperfect solutions to difficult problems. It is clear that a certain amount of training is needed which cannot be given by the system itself (Dickinson 1987, p.115). This must cover operation of the computer, use of a catalogue system and the specifics of the SAC system itself. The limitations of the database will be most apparent, however, in the early stages of use and will diminish as users become familiar with the system and its categories. The important question is whether this learning represents a useful investment of time and effort. Since the reward is an increased ability to manipulate language learning categories and increased control over learning, the answer should be yes.

Conclusion

The reorganisation project described here is far from complete and it has yet to be tested extensively. It is also based on a considerable amount of assumption and guesswork about the way in which learners approach self-access. In fact, one of the effects of the project has been to reveal just how little we really know about the motives and decision-making processes of learners in self-access. One other important lesson we have learnt is that solutions in self-access flow from the specific needs of the institution and its students rather than from comprehensive schema. For these reasons, the particular organisational measures described here are less important than the general approach. Thinking about self-access organisation in terms of the development of self-directed learning skills does seem to be productive, however, and by setting in motion a system based on this kind of thinking, we are likely to discover more about self-directed learning and what it entails.

Note

[1] The SAC at HKU is known as the Practice Lab. This project is still in progress and has been carried out in collaboration with David Gardner and Chris Copland.

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